Wanted by the Police

Henry Lawson

Could it have been the Soul of Man and none higher that gave spoken and written word to the noblest precepts of human nature? For the deeper you sound it the more noble it seems, in spite of all the wrong, injustice, sin, sorrow, pain, religion, atheism, and cynics in the world. We make (or are supposed to make, or allow others to make) laws for the protection of society, or property, or religion, or what you will; and we pay thousands of men like ourselves to protect those laws and see them carried out; and we build and maintain expensive offices, police stations, court-houses and jails for the protecting and carrying out of those laws, and the punishing of men—like ourselves—who break them. Yet, in our heart of hearts we are antagonistic to most of the laws, and to the Law as a whole (which we regard as an ass), and to the police magistrates and the judges. And we hate lawyers and loathe spies, pimps, and informers of all descriptions and the hangman with all our soul. For the Soul of Man says: Thou shalt not refuse refuge to the outcast, and thou shalt not betray the wanderer.

And those who do it we make outcast.

So we form Prisoners' Aid Societies, and Prisoners' Defence Societies, and subscribe to them and praise them and love them and encourage them to protect or defend men from the very laws that we pay so dearly to maintain. And how many of us, in the case of a crime against property—and though the property be public and ours—would refuse tucker to the hunted man, and a night's shelter from the pouring rain and the scowling, haunting, threatening, and terrifying darkness? Or show the police in the morning the track the poor wretch had taken? I know I couldn't.

The Heart of Man says: Thou shalt not.

At country railway stations, where the trains stop for refreshments, when a prisoner goes up or down in charge of a policeman, a native delicacy prevents the local loafers from seeming to notice him; but at the last moment there is always some hand to thrust in a clay pipe and cake of tobacco, and maybe a bag of sandwiches to the policeman.

And, when a prisoner escapes, in the country at least—unless he be a criminal maniac in for a serious offence, and therefore a real danger to society—we all honestly hope that they won't catch him, and we don't hide it. And, if put in a corner, most of us would help them not to catch him.

The thing came down through the ages and survived through the dark Middle Ages, as all good things come down through the ages and survive through the blackest ages. The hunted man in

the tree, or cave, or hole, and strangers creeping to him with food in the darkness, and in fear and trembling; though he was, as often happened, an enemy to their creed, country, or party. For he was outcast, and hungry and a wanderer whom men sought to kill.

These were mostly poor people or peasants; but it was so with the rich and well-to-do in the bloody Middle Ages. The Catholic country gentleman helping the Protestant refugee to escape disguised as a manservant (or a maidservant), and the Protestant country gentleman doing likewise by a hunted Catholic in his turn, as the battles went. Rebel helping royalist, and royalist helping rebel. And always, here and there, down through those ages, the delicate girl standing with her back to a door and her arms outstretched across it, and facing, with flashing eyes, the soldiers of the king or of the church—or entertaining and bluffing them with beautiful lies—to give some poor hunted devil time to hide or escape, though she a daughter of royalists and the church, and he a rebel to his king and a traitor to his creed. For they sought to kill him.

There was sanctuary in those times, in the monkeries and the churches, where the soldiers of the king dared not go, for fear of God. There has been sanctuary since, in London and other places, where His or Her Majesty's police dared not go because of the fear of man. The "Rocks" was really sanctuary, even in my time—also Woollomooloo. Now the only sanctuary is the jail.

And, not so far away, my masters! Down close to us in history, and in Merrie England, during Judge Jeffreys's "Bloody Assize," which followed on the Monmouth rebellion and formed the blackest page in English history, "a worthy widow named Elizabeth Gaunt was burned alive at Tyburn, for having sheltered a wretch who himself gave evidence against her. She settled the fuel about herself with her own hands, so that the flames should reach her quickly; and nobly said, with her last breath, that she had obeyed the sacred command of God, to give refuge to the outcast and not to betray the wanderer." (Charles Dickens's *History of England*.)

Note, I am not speaking of rebel to rebel, or loyalist to loyalist, or comrade to comrade, or clansman to clansman in trouble—that goes without saying—but of *man and woman to man and woman in trouble*, the highest form of clannishness, the clannishness that embraces the whole of this wicked world—the Clan of Mankind!

French people often helped English prisoners of war to escape to the coast and across the water, and English people did likewise by the French; and none dared raise the cry of "traitors." It was the highest form of patriotism on both sides. And, by the way, it was, is, and shall always be the women who are first to pity and help the rebel refugee or the fallen enemy.

Succour thine enemy.

There must have been a lot of human kindness under the smothering, stifling cloud of the "System" and behind the iron clank and swishing "cat" strokes of brutality—a lot of soul light in the darkness of our dark past—a page that has long since been closed down—when innocent men and women were transported to shame, misery, and horror; when mere boys were sent out on suspicion of stealing a hare from the squire's preserves, and mere girls on suspicion of lifting a ribband from the merchant's counter. But the many kindly and self-sacrificing and even noble things that free and honest settlers did, in those days of loneliness and hardship, for wretched runaway convicts and others, are closed down with the pages too. My old grandmother used to tell me tales, but—well, I don't suppose a wanted man (or a man that wasn't wanted, for that matter) ever turned away from her huts, far back in the wild bush, without a quart of coffee and a "feed" inside his hunted carcass, or went short of a bit of bread and meat to see him on, and a gruff but friendly hint, maybe, from the old man himself. And they were a type of the early settlers, she an English lady and the daughter of a clergyman. Ah! well——

Do you ever seem to remember things that you could not possibly remember? Something that happened in your mother's life, maybe, if you are a girl, or your father's, if you are a boy —that happened *to* your mother or father some years, perhaps, before you were born. I have many such haunting memories—as of having once witnessed a murder, or an attempt at murder, for instance, and once seeing a tree fall on a man—and as a child I had a memory of having been a man myself once before. But here is one of the pictures.

A hut in a dark gully; slab and stringy-bark, two rooms and a detached kitchen with the boys' room roughly partitioned off it. Big clay fire-place with a big log fire in it. The settler, or selector, and his wife; another man who might have been "uncle," and a younger woman who might have been "aunt;" two little boys and the baby. It was raining heavens hard outside, and the night was as black as pitch. The uncle was reading a report in a paper (that seemed to have come, somehow, a long way from somewhere) about two men who were wanted for sheep and cattle-stealing in the district. I decidedly remember it was during the reign of the squatters in the nearer west. There came a great gust that shook the kitchen and caused the mother to take up the baby out of the rough gin-case cradle. The father took his pipe from his mouth and said: "Ah, well! poor devils." "I hope they're not out in a night like this, poor fellows," said the mother, rocking the child in her arms. "And I hope they'll never catch 'em," snapped her sister. "The squatters has enough."

"I wonder where poor Jim is?" the mother moaned, rocking the baby, and with two of those great, silent tears starting from her haggard eyes.

"Oh don't start about Jim again, Ellen," said her sister impatiently. "He can take care of

himself. You were always rushing off to meet trouble half-way—time enough when they come, God knows."

"Now, look here, Ellen," put in Uncle Abe, soothingly, "he was up in Queensland doing well when we last heerd of him. Ain't yer never goin' to be satisfied?"

Jim was evidently another and a younger uncle, whose temperament from boyhood had given his family constant cause for anxiety.

The father sat smoking, resting his elbow on his knee, bunching up his brush of red whiskers, and looking into the fire—and back into his own foreign past in his own foreign land perhaps: and, it may be, thinking in his own language.

Silence and smoke for a while; then the mother suddenly straightened up and lifted a finger:

"Hush! What's that? I thought I heard someone outside."

"Old Poley coughin'," said Uncle Abe, after they'd listened a space. "She must be pretty bad—oughter give her a hot bran mash." (Poley was the best milker.)

"But I fancied I heard horses at the sliprails," said the mother.

"Old Prince," said Uncle Abe. "Oughter let him into the shed."

"Hush!" said the mother, "there's someone outside." There was a step, as of someone retreating after peeping through a crack in the door, but it was not old Poley's step; then, from farther off, a cough that was like old Poley's cough, but had a rack in it.

"See who it is, Peter," said the mother. Uncle Abe, who was dramatic and an ass, slipped the old double-barrelled muzzle-loader from its leathers on the wall and stood it in the far corner and sat down by it. The mother, who didn't seem to realize anything, frowned at him impatiently. The coughing fit started again. It was a man.

"Who's there? Anyone outside there?" said the settler in a loud voice.

"It's all right. Is the boss there? I want to speak to him," replied a voice with no cough in it. The tone was reassuring, yet rather strained, as if there had been an accident—or it might be a cautious policeman or bushranger reconnoitring.

"Better see what he wants, Peter," said his sister-in-law quietly. "Something's the matter—it may be the police."

Peter threw an empty bag over his shoulders, took the peg from the door, opened it and stepped out. The racking fit of coughing burst forth again, nearer. “That’s a church-yarder!” commented Uncle Abe.

The settler came inside and whispered to the others, who started up, interested. The coughing started again outside. When the fit was over the mother said:

“Wait a minute till I get the boys out of the road and then bring them in.” The boys were bundled into the end room and told to go to bed at once. They knelt up on the rough bed of slabs and straw mattress, instead, and applied eyes and ears to the cracks in the partition.

The mother called to the father, who had gone outside again.

“Tell them to come inside, Peter.”

“Better bring the horses into the yard first and put them under the shed,” said the father to the unknown outside in the rain and darkness. Clatter of sliprails let down and tired hoofs over them, and sliprails put up again; then they came in.

Wringing wet and apparently knocked up, a tall man with black curly hair and beard, black eyes and eyebrows that made his face seem the whiter; dressed in tweed coat, too small for him and short at the sleeves, strapped riding-pants, leggings, and lace-up boots, all sodden. The other a mere boy, beardless or clean shaven, figure and face of a native, but lacking in something; dressed like his mate like drovers or stockmen. Arms and legs of riders, both of them; cabbage-tree hats in left hands—as though the right ones had to be kept ready for something (and looking like it)—pistol butts probably. The young man had a racking cough that seemed to wrench and twist his frame as the settler steered him to a seat on a stool by the fire. (In the intervals of coughing he glared round like a watched and hunted sneak-thief —as if the cough was something serious against the law, and he must try to stop it.)

“Take that wet coat off him at once, Peter,” said the settler’s wife, “and let me dry it.” Then, on second thoughts: “Take this candle and take him into the house and get some dry things on him.”

The dark man, who was still standing in the doorway, swung aside to let them pass as the settler steered the young man into the “house;” then swung back again. He stood, drooping rather, with one hand on the door-post; his big, wild, dark eyes kept glancing round and round the room and even at the ceiling, seeming to overlook or be unconscious of the faces after the first keen glance, but always coming back to rest on the door in the partition of the boys’ room opposite.

“Won’t you sit down by the fire and rest and dry yourself?” asked the settler’s wife, rather timidly, after watching him for a moment.

He looked at the door again, abstractedly it seemed, or as if he had not heard her.

Then Uncle Abe (who, by the way, was supposed to know more than he should have been supposed to know) spoke out.

“Set down, man! Set down and dry yerself. There’s no-one there except the boys—that’s the boys’ room. Would yer like to look through?”

The man seemed to rouse himself from a reverie. He let his arm and hand fall from the doorpost to his side like dead things. “Thank you, missus,” he said, apparently unconscious of Uncle Abe, and went and sat down in front of the fire.

“Hadn’t you better take your wet coat off and let me dry it?”

“Thank you.” He took off his coat, and, turning the sleeves inside out, hung it from his knees with the lining to the fire; then he leaned forward, with his hands on his knees, and stared at the burning logs and steam. He was unarmed, or, if not, had left his pistols in the saddle-bag outside.

Andy Page, general handy-man (who was there all the time, but has not been mentioned yet, because he didn’t mention anything himself which seemed necessary to this dark picture), now remarked to the stranger, with a wooden-face expression but a soft heart, that the rain would be a good thing for the grass, mister, and make it grow; a safe remark to make under the present, or, for the matter of that, under any circumstances.

The stranger said, “Yes, it would.”

“It will make it spring up like anything,” said Andy.

The stranger admitted that it would.

Uncle Abe joined in, or, rather, slid in, and they talked about the drought and the rain and the state of the country, in monosyllables mostly, with “Jesso,” and “So it is,” and “You’re right there,” till the settler came back with the young man dressed in rough and patched, but dry, clothes. He took another stool by his mate’s side at the fire, and had another fit of coughing. When it was over, Uncle Abe remarked:

“That’s a regular church-yarder yer got, young feller.”

The young fellow, too exhausted to speak, even had he intended doing so, turned his head in a quick, half-terrified way and gave it two short jerky nods.

The settler had brought a bottle out—it was gin they kept for medicine. They gave him some hot, and he took it in his sudden, frightened, half-animal way, like a dog that was used to ill-usage.

“He ought to be in the hospital,” said the mother.

“He ought to be in bed right now at once,” snapped the sister. “Couldn’t you stay till morning, or at least till the rain clears up?” she said to the elder man. “No one ain’t likely to come near this place in this weather.”

“If we did he’d stand a good chance to get both hospital and a bed pretty soon, and for a long stretch, too,” said the dark man grimly. “No, thank you all the same, miss—and missus —I’ll get him fixed up all right and safe before morning.”

The father came into the end room with a couple of small feed boxes and both boys tumbled under the blankets. The father emptied some chaff, from a bag in the corner, into the boxes, and then dished some corn from another bag into the chaff and mixed it well with his hands. Then he went out with the boxes under his arms, and the boys got up again.

The mother had brought two chairs from the front room (I remember the kind well: black painted hardwood that were always coming to pieces. and with apples painted on the backs). She stood them with their backs to the fire and, taking up the young man’s wet clothes, which the settler had brought out under his arm and thrown on a stool, arranged them over the backs of chairs and the stool to dry. He lost some of his nervousness or scared manner under the influence of the gin, and answered one or two questions with reference to his complaint.

The baby was in the cradle asleep. The sister drew boiling water from the old-fashioned fountain over one side of the fire and made coffee. The mother laid the coarse brownish cloth and set out the camp-oven bread, salt beef, tin plates, and pintpots. This was always called “setting the table” in the bush.

“You’d better have it by the fire,” said the bush-wife to the dark man.

“Thank you, missus,” he said, as he moved to a bench by the table, “but it’s plenty warm enough here. Come on, Jack.”

Jack, under the influence of another tot, was in a fit state to sit down to a table something like a Christian, instead of coming to his food like a beaten dog.

The hum of bush common-places went on. One of the boys fell across the bed and into deep slumber; the other watched on awhile, but must have dozed.

When he was next aware, he saw, through the cracks, the taller man putting on his dried coat by the fire; then he went to a rough “sofa” at the side of the kitchen, where the young man was sleeping—with his head and shoulders curled in to the wall and his arm over his face, like a possum hiding from the light—and touched him on the shoulder.

“Come on, Jack,” he said, “wake up.”

Jack sprang to his feet with a blundering rush, grappled with his mate, and made a break for the door.

“It’s all right, Jack,” said the other, gently yet firmly, holding and shaking him. “Go in with the boss and get into your own clothes—we’ve got to make a start.” The other came to himself and went inside quietly with the settler. The dark man stretched himself, crossed the kitchen and looked down at the sleeping child; he returned to the fire without comment. The wildness had left his eyes. The bushwoman was busy putting some tucker in a sugar-bag. “There’s tea and sugar and salt in these mustard tins, and they won’t get wet,” she said, “and there’s some butter too; but I don’t know how you’ll manage about the bread—I’ve wrapped it up, but you’ll have to keep it dry as well as you can.”

“Thank you, missus, but that’ll be all right. I’ve got a bit of oil-cloth,” he said.

They spoke lamely for a while, against time; then the bushwoman touched the spring, and their voices became suddenly low and earnest as they drew together. The stranger spoke as at a funeral, but the funeral was his own.

“I don’t care about myself so much,” he said, “for I’m tired of it, and—and—for the matter of that I’m tired of everything; but I’d like to see poor Jack right, and I’ll try to get clear myself, for his sake. You’ve seen him. I can’t blame myself, for I took him from a life that was worse than jail. You know how much worse than animals some brutes treat their children in the bush. And he was an “adopted.” You know what that means. He was idiotic with ill-treatment when I got hold of him. He’s sensible enough when away with me, and true as steel. He’s about the only living human thing I’ve got to care for, or to care for me, and I want to win out of this hell for his sake.”

He paused, and they were all silent. He was measuring time, as his next words proved: “Jack must be nearly ready now.” Then he took a packet from some inside pocket of his blue dungaree shirt. It was wrapped in oil-cloth, and he opened it and laid it on the table; there was a small Bible and a packet of letters—and portraits, maybe.

“Now, missus,” he said, “you mustn’t think me soft, and I’m neither a religious man nor a hypocrite. But that Bible was given to me by my mother, and her hand-writing is in it, so I couldn’t chuck it away. Some of the letters are hers and some—someone else’s. *You* can read them if you like. Now, I want you to take care of them for me and dry them if they are a little damp. If I get clear I’ll send for them some day, and, if I don’t—well, I don’t want them to be taken with me. I don’t want the police to know who I was, and what I was, and who my relatives are and where they are. You wouldn’t have known, if you *do* know now, only your husband knew me on the diggings, and happened to be in the court when I got off on that first cattle-stealing charge, and recognized me again to-night. I can’t thank you enough, but I want you to remember that I’ll never forget. Even if I’m taken and have to serve my time I’ll never forget it, and I’ll live to prove it.”

“We—we don’t want no thanks, an’ we don’t want no proofs,” said the bushwoman, her voice breaking.

The sister, her eyes suspiciously bright, took up the packet in her sharp, practical way, and put it in a work-box she had in the kitchen.

The settler brought the young fellow out dressed in his own clothes. The elder shook hands quietly all round, or, rather, they shook hands with him. “Now, Jack!” he said. They had fastened an oilskin cape round Jack’s shoulders.

Jack came forward and shook hands with a nervous grip that he seemed to have trouble to take off. “I won’t forget it,” he said; “that’s all I can say—I won’t forget it.” Then they went out with the settler. The rain had held up a little. Clatter of sliprails down and up, but the settler didn’t come back.

“Wonder what Peter’s doing?” said the wife.

“Showin’ ’em down the short cut,” said Uncle Abe.

But, presently, clatter of sliprails down again, and cattle driven over them.

“Wonder what he’s doing with the cows,” said the wife.

They waited in wonder, and with growing anxiety, for some quarter of an hour; then Abe and Andy, going out to see, met the settler coming back.

“What in thunder are you doing with the cows, Peter?” asked Uncle Abe.

“Oh, just driving them out and along a bit over those horse tracks; we might get into

trouble," said Peter.

When the boys woke it was morning, and the mother stood by the bed. "You needn't get up yet, and don't say anyone was here last night if you're asked," she whispered, and went out. They were up on their knees at once with their eyes to the cracks, and got the scare of their young lives. Three mounted troopers were steaming their legs at the fire—their bodies had been protected by oilskin capes. The mother was busy about the table and the sister changing the baby. Presently the two younger policemen sat down to bread and bacon and coffee, but their senior (the sergeant) stood with his back to the fire, with a pint-pot of coffee in his hand, eating nothing, but frowning suspiciously round the room.

Said one of the young troopers to Aunt Annie, to break the lowering silence, "You don't remember me?"

"Oh yes, I do; you were at Brown's School at Old Pipeclay—but I was only there a few months."

"You look as if you didn't get much sleep," said the seniorsergeant, bluntly, to the settler's wife, "and your sister too."

"And so would you," said Aunt Annie, sharply, "if you were up with a sick baby all night."

"Sad affair that, about Brown the schoolmaster," said the younger trooper to Aunt Annie.

"Yes," said Aunt Annie, "it was indeed."

The senior-sergeant stood glowering. Presently he said brutally—"The baby don't seem to be very sick; what's the matter with it?"

The young troopers move uneasily, and one impatiently.

"You should have seen her" (the baby) "about twelve o'clock last night," said Aunt Annie, "we never thought she would live till the morning."

"Oh, didn't you?" said the senior-sergeant, in a half-and-half tone.

The mother took the baby and held it so that its face was hidden from the elder policeman.

"What became of Brown's family, miss?" asked the young trooper. "Do you remember Lucy Brown?"

"I really don't know," answered Aunt Annie, "all I know is that they went to Sydney. But I

think I heard that Lucy was married."

Just then Uncle Abe and Andy came in to breakfast. Andy sat down in the corner with a wooden face, and Uncle Abe, who was a tall man, took up a position with his back to the fire, by the side of the senior trooper, and seemed perfectly at home and at ease. He lifted up his coat behind, and his face was a study in bucolic unconsciousness. The settler passed through to the boys' room (which was harness room, feed room, tool house, and several other things), and as he passed out with a shovel the sergeant said, "So you haven't seen anyone along here for three days?"

"No," said the settler.

"Except Jimmy Marshfield that took over Barker's selection in Long Gully," put in Aunt Annie. "He was here yesterday. Do you want him?"

"An' them three fellers on horseback as rode past the corner of the lower paddock the day afore yesterday," mumbled Uncle Abe, "but one of 'em was one of the Coxes' boys, I think."

At the sound of Uncle Abe's voice both women started and paled, and looked as if they'd like to gag him, but he was safe.

"What were they like?" asked the constable.

The women paled again, but Uncle Abe described them. He had imagination, and was only slow where the truth was concerned.

"Which way were they going?" asked the constable.

"Towards Mudgee" (the police-station township), said Uncle Abe.

The constable gave his arm an impatient jerk and dropped Uncle Abe.

Uncle Abe looked as if he wanted badly to wink hard at someone, but there was no friendly eye in the line of wink that would be safe.

"Well, it's strange," said the sergeant, "that the men we're after didn't look up an out-of-the-way place like this for tucker, or horse-feed, or news, or something."

"Now, look here," said Aunt Annie, "we're neither cattle duffers nor sympathizers; we're honest, hard-working people, and God knows we're glad enough to see a strange face when it comes to this lonely hole; and if you only want to insult us you'd better stop it at once. I

tell you there's nobody been here but old Jimmy Marshfield for three days, and we haven't seen a stranger for over a fortnight, and that's enough. My sister's delicate and worried enough without you." She had a masculine habit of putting her hand up on something when holding forth, and as it happened it rested on the work-box on the shelf that contained the cattle-stealer's mother's Bible; but if put to it, Aunt Annie would have sworn on the Bible itself.

"Oh well, no offence, no offence," said the constable. "Come on, men, if you've finished, it's no use wasting time round here."

The two young troopers thanked the mother for their breakfast, and strange to say, the one who had spoken to her went up to Aunt Annie and shook hands warmly with her. Then they went out, and mounting, rode back in the direction of Mudgee.

Uncle Abe winked long and hard and solemnly at Andy Page, and Andy winked back like a mechanical wooden image. The two women nudged and smiled and seemed quite girlish, not to say skittish, all the morning. Something had come to break the cruel hopeless monotony of their lives. And even the settler became foolishly cheerful.

Five years later: same hut, same yard, and a not much wider clearing in the gully, and a little more fencing—the women rather more haggard and tired looking, the settler rather more horny-handed and silent, and Uncle Abe rather more philosophical. The men had had to go out and work on the stations. With the settler and his wife it was, "If we only had a few pounds to get the farm cleared and fenced, and another good plough horse, and a few more cows." That had been the burden of their song for the five years and more.

Then, one evening, the mail boy left a parcel. It was a small parcel, in cloth-paper, carefully tied and sealed. What could it be? It couldn't be the Christmas number of a weekly they subscribed to, for it never came like that. Aunt Annie cut the discussion short by cutting the string with a table knife and breaking the wax.

And behold, a clean sugar-bag tightly folded and rolled.

And inside a strong whitey-brown envelope.

And on the envelope written or rather printed the words: "For horse-feed, stabling, and supper."

And underneath, in smaller letters, "Send Bible and portraits to ————." (Here a name and address.)

And inside the envelope a roll of notes. “Count them,” said Aunt Annie.

But the settler’s horny and knotty hands trembled too much, and so did his wife’s withered ones; so Aunt Annie counted them.

“Fifty pounds!” she said.

“Fifty pounds!” mused the settler, scratching his head in a perplexed way.

“Fifty pounds!” gasped his wife.

“Yes,” said Aunt Annie sharply, “fifty pounds!”

“Well, you’ll get it settled between yer some day!” drawled Uncle Abe.

Later, after thinking comfortably over the matter, he observed:

“Cast yer coffee an’ bread an’ bacon upon the waters——” Uncle Abe never hurried himself or anybody else.